

Democracy, Terrorism and American Policy in the Arab World

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The United States has embarked upon what President Bush and Secretary of State Rice has called a “generational challenge” to encourage political reform and democracy in the Arab world. The Bush Administration and other defenders of the democracy campaign contend that the push for Arab democracy is not only about spreading American values, but also about insuring American security. They hypothesize that as democracy grows in the Arab world, anti-American terrorism from the Arab world will decline. Therefore, the promotion of democracy in the Arab world is not only consistent with American security goals in the area, but necessary to achieve those goals.

Two questions present themselves in considering this element of the “Bush Doctrine” in the Arab world: 1) Is there a relationship between terrorism and democracy such that the more democratic a country becomes, the less likely it is to produce terrorists and terrorist groups? In other words, is the security rationale for democracy promotion in the Arab world based on a sound premise?; and 2) What kind of governments would likely be generated by democratic elections in Arab countries? Would they be willing to cooperate with the United States on important policy objectives in the Middle East, not only in maintaining democracy but also on Arab-Israeli, Gulf security and oil issues?

This paper will consider these two questions. It finds that there is little empirical evidence linking democracy with an absence of or reduction in terrorism. It questions whether democracy would reduce the motives and opportunities of groups like al-Qa’ida, which oppose democracy on both religious and practical grounds. It examines recent trends in Arab public opinion and elections, concluding that while Arab publics are very supportive of democracy, democratic elections in Arab states are likely to produce Islamist governments which would be much less likely to cooperate with the United States than their authoritarian predecessors.

Terrorism and Democracy

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President Bush is absolutely clear about why the promotion of democracy in the Muslim world is not only consistent with American values, but central to American interests. He laid out that logic in an address just a few months ago, right here at the National Defense University:¹

Our strategy to keep the peace in the longer term is to help change the conditions that give rise to extremism and terror, especially in the broader Middle East. Parts of that region have been caught for generations in the cycle of tyranny and despair and radicalism. When a dictatorship controls the political life of a country, responsible opposition cannot develop and dissent is driven underground and toward the extreme. And to draw attention away from their social and economic failures, dictators place blame on other countries and other races and stir the hatred that leads to violence. This status quo of despotism and anger cannot be ignored or appeased, kept in a box or bought off.

The President's analysis of the link between the lack of democracy in the Arab world and terrorism is shared across the political spectrum in the United States. 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry accepted the need for greater political reform in the Middle East as an integral part of the war on terrorism.² *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, America's leading commentator on foreign affairs, has done more to propound this syllogism to the attentive American public than anyone else.³ A senior Middle East policy maker in the Clinton Administration, after September 11, contended that the Administration he served had ignored the democracy issue in the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace. In this prominent *mea culpa*, he said that strategy was a mistake and urged a new American policy focused on political reform.⁴ A recent book published by the Council on Foreign Relations, whose lead author was the Director of Policy Planning in the Clinton State Department, argues that the roots of al-Qa'ida are in the poverty and educational deficiencies of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan. These deficiencies were caused by the authoritarian nature of those states, and can only be combated by their democratization.⁵ The syllogism underlying the Bush Administration's emphasis on political reform in the Middle East as a necessary part of the war on terrorism is widely accepted, and is not going to disappear when the neo-conservatives leave office.

Terrorism and Democracy: The Empirical Evidence

¹ March 8, 2005 speech by President Bush at the National Defense University, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/03/20050308-3.html (accessed April 4, 2005).

² "We must support the development of free and democratic societies in the Arab and Muslim worlds to win the war of ideas...In a Kerry Administration, America will be clear with repressive governments in the region that we expect to see them change, not just for our sake but for their own survival." www.johnkerry.com/issues/national_security/terrorism.html. Last accessed December 28, 2004.

³ For example: "Because if it is impossible for the peoples of even one Arab state to voluntarily organize themselves around a social contract for democratic life, then we are looking at dictators and kings ruling this region as far as the eye can see. And that will guarantee that this region will be a cauldron of oil-financed pathologies and terrorism for the rest of our lives." *New York Times*, January 6, 2005.

⁴ Martin Indyk, "Back to the Bazaar," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2002.

⁵ Morton H. Halperin, Joseph T. Siegle and Michael M. Weinstein, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace*, (New York: Routledge for the Council on Foreign Relations, 2004), Chapter 5: "In short, even as new security threats emerge in the twenty-first century, one thing remains constant: authoritarian governments are at the source." p. 121.

While there is a logic to the syllogism linking a lack of democracy to terrorism, that logic can be challenged on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Empirically, the numbers just do not appear to bear out a close link between terrorism and the lack of democracy. Between 2000 and 2003, based on the State Department's annual *Global Patterns of Terrorism*, 269 major terrorist incidents occurred in countries classified as "free" in the Freedom House *Freedom in the World* annual report; 119 such incidents occurred in countries classified as "partly free;" and 138 occurred in countries classified as "not free."⁶ This is not to argue that free countries are more likely to produce terrorists than other countries. The free country subject to the greatest number of terrorist incidents (and, by far, the greatest number of terrorist incidents of any country in the world) is India. It is fair to assume that a number of those terrorist incidents, in Kashmir, are perpetrated by groups based in Pakistan, though clearly not all of them. It is simply to point out that there appears, at least on a first glance at the numbers, to be no clear relationship between type of government and likelihood of terrorist activity.

The case of India stands out in bold relief in these numbers. Terrorist incidents in India account for fully 75% of all terrorist incidents in free countries in the four years surveyed. A vibrant democracy with the full range of political rights available to its citizens, India has rightly been held up as an example of the possibility of democracy outside the context of wealthy Western countries. Thomas Friedman regularly asserts that it is Indian democracy which has kept extremist Islamist ideologies from dominating the Indian Muslim community. Yet, as strong as Indian democracy is, one Indian Prime Minister was assassinated (Indira Gandhi by a Sikh extremist) and a former Prime Minister campaigning to regain the office was assassinated (her son, Rajiv Gandhi, by Tamil extremists) by political opponents. If democracy reduces the prospects for terrorism, India's numbers should not be so high. It is also interesting to note that in 2003, two countries classified as "not free" accounted for 50% of the terrorist incidents in "not free" countries – Iraq and Afghanistan. At least for that year, movement toward democracy did not lessen the incentives for terrorists to operate in those countries.

More anecdotal evidence also calls into question a necessary relationship between regime type, particularly democracy, and terrorism. In the 1970's and 1980's, democratic countries generated a number of brutal terrorist organizations: the Red Brigades in Italy, the Provisional IRA in Ireland and the United Kingdom, the Japanese Red Army, the Red Army Faction (Baader-Meinhof Group) in West Germany. The transition to democracy in Spain did not eliminate ETA (Basque separatist) terrorism. Turkish democracy suffered through a decade of mounting political violence from the late 1960's through the late 1970's. In fact, a statistical study based upon data through the 1980's found a strong positive correlation between democracy and terrorism.⁷ The strong and admirable democratic system in Israel has been the subject of terrorist assault, but has also produced some number of its own terrorists, including the assassin

⁶ Calculations from U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, 2000 through 2003, www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*, 1999-2000, 2000-2001, 2001-2002, 2003. I excluded from this count terrorist incidents which occurred in Israel, as they were overwhelmingly perpetrated by Palestinians, not Israelis (or Israeli Arabs), and would have skewed the count of incidents in democratic countries. I also excluded the September 11 attacks on the United States from the count, as they were not perpetrated by Americans.

⁷ W. Eubank and L. Weinberg, "Does Democracy Encourage Terrorism?" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1994).

of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Nearly every day presents a painful reminder that real democratization in Iraq has been accompanied by serious terrorism. There is a memorial in Oklahoma City testifying to the fact that our own democracy has not been free of domestic terrorism.

There is no empirical evidence for a strong link between democracy, or any other regime type, and terrorism, in either a positive or a negative direction.⁸ Terrorism springs from sources other than form of government. There is no reason, based on the evidence of the past, to believe that a more democratic Arab world will generate fewer terrorists.

Terrorism and Democracy: Logic, Theory and al-Qa'ida

There are also logical and theoretical problems, as well as these empirical problems, with the syllogism underlying the American push for democracy as part of the war on terrorism. The underlying logic of the assertion that democracy will reduce terrorism is the belief that, able to participate openly in competitive politics and have their voices heard in the public square, potential terrorists and terrorist sympathizers will not feel the need to resort to violence to achieve their goals. Even if they lose in one round, the confidence that they will be able to win in the future will inhibit the temptation to use extra-democratic means. The habits of democracy will ameliorate extremism.

Well, maybe. But it is just as logical to assume that terrorists, who rarely represent political agendas that could mobilize electoral majorities, would reject the very principles of majority rule and minority rights on which liberal democracy is based. If they cannot achieve their goals through democratic politics, why should we assume that they will privilege the democratic process over those goals? It seems more likely that, having been mobilized into politics by a burning desire to achieve a goal, a desire so strong that they were willing to take up arms and commit acts of violence against defenseless civilians in order to realize it, terrorists and potential terrorists will attack democracy and its processes if those processes do not produce their desired result. Respect for American democracy did not stop Southern slave-holders and their supporters from taking up arms in 1861. Respect for the nascent Iraqi democracy, despite a very successful election in January 2005, has not stopped Iraqi and foreign terrorists from their campaign against the new political order in that country. If the goal is important enough, it will trump democracy for some number of militants, who in turn might become terrorists.

Moreover, we know that terrorist organizations are not mass-based organizations. They are small and secretive. They are not organized or based on democratic principles. They revolve around strong leaders and a cluster of committed followers, willing to take actions from which the vast majority of people, even people who might support their political agenda, would rightly shrink. It seems unlikely that simply being outvoted would deflect them from their path.

⁸ A leading and oft-cited recent work on terrorism, by one of the most respected scholars of the subject, does not even list "democracy" in its index. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998).

America's major foe in the war on terrorism, al-Qa'ida, certainly would not close up shop if every Muslim country in the world were to become a democracy. Usama bin Laden has been very clear about democracy – he does not like it. His political model is not democratic; it is the early years of the Muslim caliphate. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was the closest in modern times to that model in bin Laden's view. In an October 2003 "message to Iraqis," bin Laden castigated those in the Arab world who are "calling for a peaceful democratic solution in dealing with apostate governments or which Jewish and crusader invaders instead of fighting in the name of God." He referred to democracy as "this deviant and misleading practice," and "the faith of the ignorant."⁹ His view of American democracy is equally negative: "The majority of you [Americans] are vulgar and without sound ethics or good manners. You elect the evil from among you, the greatest liars and the least decent..."¹⁰ Bin Laden's ally in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, was even more direct in his reaction to the Iraqi election of January 2005: "The legislator who must be obeyed in a democracy is man, and not Allah...That is the very essence of heresy and polytheism and error, as it contradicts the bases of the faith and monotheism, and because it makes the weak, ignorant man Allah's partner in His most central divine prerogative – namely, ruling and legislating."¹¹

Al-Qa'ida is not fighting for democracy. Its leaders profoundly distrust democracy, and not just on ideological grounds. They know that they could not come to power through free elections. There is absolutely no reason to believe that a move to more democratic Arab states would deflect them from their course. There is no reason to believe that they would not be able to recruit followers in more democratic Arab states, as long as those more democratic Arab states continued to have good relations with the United States, made peace with Israel and generally behaved in ways that Washington hopes that they will. It is the American agenda in the Middle East, as much if not more than democracy itself, to which al-Qa'ida objects. As Washington hopes that a democratic Middle East will be a Middle East that continues to accept a major American role and cooperates with American goals, it is simply foolish to think that democracy will dry up support for al-Qa'ida.

When it works, liberal democracy is the best form of government. It affirms the dignity of each person in the right to vote. It provides the check of popular elections on those in power, along with other constitutional and legal barriers to the abuse of power. It provides for an independent judiciary to guarantee those rights and curb the abuses that inevitably come with great power. There is much to recommend it. But there is no evidence that it reduces terrorism or prevents terrorism. Regrettably, it seems that regime type has no relationship to the development or prevalence of terrorism. Thus, a fundamental assumption of the Bush Administration's push for democracy in the Arab world as part of the war on terrorism is seriously flawed.

⁹ Message broadcast on al-Jazeera television, October 19, 2003. Text at: <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/ACB47241-D25F-46CB-B673-56FAB1C2837F.htm> (accessed April 8, 2005).

¹⁰ From a message broadcast on al-Jazeera television on October 18, 2003: <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8E8EA580-943C-4FBF-9ABD-21B47627FECD.htm> (accessed April 8, 2005).

¹¹ Middle East Media and Research Institute, Special Dispatch Series, No. 856, February 1, 2005.

Arab Democracy: What to Expect

Would democratically elected Arab governments be as cooperative with the United States as the current authoritarian incumbents? That is highly unlikely. To the extent that public opinion can be measured in these countries, we know that Arabs are very supportive of democracy. When they have a chance to vote in real elections, they generally turn out in percentages far greater than Americans do. However, we also know that the United States is distinctly unpopular in the Arab world now. If Arab governments were to more accurately reflect public opinion, they would be more anti-American. We also know that, in recent free elections in the Arab world, Islamists have done very well. Moves toward Arab democracy will, at least for the foreseeable future, most likely generate Islamist governments which will be less likely to cooperate with the United States on important American policy goals, including American basing rights in the region and peace with Israel.

Arab Public Opinion: Yes to Democracy, No to the United States

Arabs in general do not have any problem with democracy, though some Islamist ideologues do. The Pew Global Attitudes Project conducted public opinion surveys in a number of Arab countries in 2003, asking the question whether “democracy is a Western way of doing things that would not work here” or whether democracy would work” in that country. In Kuwait, 83% said democracy would work there, only 16% thought it would not; in Jordan, 68% said democracy would work there, 25% disagreed; in the Palestinian Authority, 53% thought democracy would work there, 38% disagreed.¹² In a 2002 poll by Zogby International, majorities of those polled in five Arab states (Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) had a favorable attitude toward American freedom and democracy, even while holding very unfavorable attitudes toward U.S. policy in the Arab world.¹³ In that same Zogby International poll, in 7 Arab countries “civil/personal rights” ranked as the most important political issue among those polled, exceeding health care, the Palestinian issue and economic questions.¹⁴

These positive views toward democracy are borne out on the ground. Turnout in Arab states for real elections is regularly very high. Despite the boycott by most Sunni Arabs, about 20% of the population, and threats of violence Iraqi turnout for the January 2005 parliamentary election was 53% of registered voters. Algerians turned out at a rate of 58% for their April 2004 presidential election. Official figures put Palestinian turnout for the January 2005 presidential election at 73%, despite HAMAS’ refusal to participate. 76% of eligible Yemeni voters cast their ballots in the 2003 legislative election; 59% of Jordanian voters did the same in their 2003 parliamentary election.¹⁵ Turnout in Kuwaiti parliamentary elections is regularly over 70%. While there are certainly anti-democratic forces in the Arab world, and some Arab elections are characterized by low turnout and/or low voter registration rates (in the Riyadh area, only about

¹² “Iraq Vote Mirrors Desire for Democracy in Muslim World,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, February 3, 2005, <http://people-press.org/commentary/pdf/107.pdf>.

¹³ James J. Zogby, What Arabs Think: Values, Beliefs and Concerns, Zogby International and the Arab Thought Forum, September 2002, pp. 63-64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁵ <http://www.electionguide.org/turnout2003.htm>

30% of eligible voters registered to cast their ballots in the February 2005 municipal elections¹⁶), in general Arabs are enthusiastic about voting and elections. Arguments that Arab “culture” is a bar to democracy simply do not stand up to scrutiny.

The problem for the United States in promoting democracy in the Arab world is not that Arabs do not like democracy, it is that Washington will probably not like the governments that Arab democracy would produce. If we assume that more democratic Arab governments will be more affected by their publics’ opinions than the incumbent Arab regimes, Arab democracy should produce more anti-American foreign policies. In a February-March 2003 poll conducted by Zogby International and the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland in 6 Arab countries, overwhelming majorities held either a very or somewhat unfavorable attitude toward the United States. Lebanon had the highest percentage of those polled who saw the United States in either a very or somewhat favorable light – 32%. The overall favorable rating of the U.S. in Egypt was 13%, in the United Arab Emirates was 10%, in Morocco and Jordan was 6% and in Saudi Arabia was 4%.¹⁷

These numbers most certainly were affected by the Iraq War, which was either about to occur or was occurring as the poll was conducted. However, these numbers are not that much different from those found in less comprehensive polls conducted before and after the Iraq War. In a Gallup poll conducted in early 2002 in a number of Muslim countries, strong majorities in Jordan (62%) and Saudi Arabia (64%) gave the United States an unfavorable rating. Only in Lebanon did favorable views of the United States roughly balance unfavorable views.¹⁸ In a Zogby International poll conducted in seven Arab countries at about the same time, unfavorable ratings of the United States ranged from a low of 48% in Kuwait (a plurality of those polled) to highs of 87% in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with unfavorable ratings in Egypt of 76% and Jordan of 61%.¹⁹ In a Pew Global Attitudes poll conducted in March 2004, one year after the Iraq War, 93% of Jordanians had either a somewhat unfavorable or a very unfavorable attitude toward the United States; 68% of Moroccans had similar views.²⁰

While it is not possible to pinpoint, from available poll data, the precise sources of anti-American feeling in the Arab world, there are indications that it is American policy in the region, not a rejection of American ideals, which drives Arab anti-Americanism. In the February-March 2003 poll by the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland and Zogby International, in every Arab country except the UAE those polled said that their attitudes toward the United States are based more on American policy than on their values. In Egypt, 46% identified American policy as the source of their feelings, 43% identified their values. In the other countries polled (Saudi

¹⁶ Neil MacFarquhar, “Asterisk Aside, First National Vote for Saudis,” New York Times, February 10, 2005.

¹⁷ “Arab Public Opinion Survey,” by Shibley Telhami, Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, in cooperation with Zogby International, February 19-March 11, 2003, <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/sadat/pub/survey2003.htm>.

¹⁸ Heather Munson, “Poll of Islamic World: Favorability Toward, U.S., Britain,” Gallup Organization, February 26, 2002, www.gallup.com/poll/content/?ci=5722.

¹⁹ Zogby, What Arabs Think, p. 61.

²⁰ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Trends 2005, Chapter 7 – “Global Opinion: The Spread of Anti-Americanism,” <http://people-press.org/commentary/pdf/104.pdf>.

Arabia, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan), no fewer than 58% said their views on America were based on American policy.²¹ Arab publics are particularly cynical (or, at least were in 2004) about the American policy of democracy promotion in their region. In the May 2004 poll done by the Sadat Chair and Zogby International, only in Lebanon did a substantial percentage of those polled (44%) believe that the promotion of democracy was an important motive in the American war against Iraq. 25% of Jordanians polled saw democracy as an important motive for the war. In the other four countries polled (Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE), fewer than 10% saw democracy as one of America's motives for the war. Majorities in most of the countries saw the war as motivated by an American desire to control oil, weaken the Muslim world and protect Israel.²² In the less extensive Pew Global Attitudes survey of 2004, only 17% of Moroccans polled and 11% of Jordanians thought that the American "war on terrorism" was a sincere effort, not a cover for other goals.²³ One need not do a poll to know that American policy on Arab-Israeli questions is very unpopular in the Arab world.

There is no doubt that public opinion can be a fickle thing. Anti-American feelings in the Arab world could change markedly with events. These numbers are not written in stone. It is possible (though there is little data to test the assertion) that Arab anti-Americanism would decline if Washington no longer supported authoritarian Arab governments. It certainly seems, from anecdotal evidence, that the Iranian public has a more favorable impression of the United States than the Iranian government. However, there is little to indicate that the Syrian public, whose government is even more authoritarian than Iran's and equally out of favor with Washington, is pro-American. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the United States is very unpopular in the Arab world because of all of its policies there, not simply its strong relations with unpopular governments. Thus, Arab governments more in tune with their public opinions, as democratic governments must be, will feel enormous pressure to distance themselves from the United States.

Arab Elections: The Recent Record

It is very likely, based upon past performance, that real democratic elections in Arab states will redound to the benefit of Islamist candidates, groups and parties. In many recent Arab elections, the Islamists did very well. In all recent Arab elections, they emerged as the leading political force in opposition to the government. This very brief survey of relatively free Arab elections gives an overview of how Islamist parties have performed:

- In the Kuwaiti parliamentary election of 2003, Sunni (Muslim Brotherhood and salafi) and Shi'a Islamists combined to win 17 of the 50 seats. Sunni salafis did much better than they had in the past, becoming the largest bloc within the Islamist group with 5 seats and a number of independent sympathizers. Pro-government independents won 25 seats, amid accusations of government support for its favored

²¹ "Arab Public Opinion Survey," <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/sadat/pub/survey2003.htm>.

²² "Arab Attitudes Towards Political and Social Issues, Foreign Policy and the Media," public opinion poll conducted by the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and Zogby International, May 2004, <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/SADAT/pub>.

²³ Pew Research Center, Chapter 7 - "Global Opinion: The Spread of Anti-Americanism," <http://people-press.org/commentary/pdf/104.pdf>.

candidates.²⁴ While this was a slight reduction in their numbers from the 1999 election, Islamists form the dominant ideological bloc in the Kuwaiti parliament.

- In the Jordanian parliamentary election of 2003, held after three postponements and a change in the electoral laws to benefit independent candidates, pro-regime independents swept the field, with 87 of 110 seats. The Muslim Brotherhood's political party, the Islamic Action Front, won 17 seats and independent Islamists another 3 seats. As a percentage of seats, the Islamists performance was down from their stronger showings in the 1989 and 1993 elections (the IAF boycotted the 1997 election). However, they form the major opposition bloc and tended to run first in urban districts.
- In the Yemeni parliamentary election of 2003, the party of President Ali Abdallah Salih, the General People's Congress, won 238 of the 301 seats. The Yemeni Reform Group (al-Islah), a combination of Islamist and tribal elements, won 46 seats and forms the opposition.²⁵
- In the Moroccan parliamentary elections of 2002, the new Justice and Development Party, an overtly Islamist party running for the first time, took 42 of the 325 seats. Only two long-established parties, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces and the Independence (al-Istiqlal) Party, won more seats (50 and 48, respectively).²⁶
- In the Bahraini parliamentary election of 2002, in two rounds of voting, Islamist candidates (Sunni and Shi'i) took between 19 and 21 of the 40 seats (depending upon how observers classified some independent candidates). The major Shi'i political group boycotted the elections, protesting constitutional changes in the country, so Sunni Islamists candidates did better than might have been expected in a Shi'a majority country. The largest bloc of Islamist candidates is from the Sunni salafi trend.²⁷
- In the 2005 Saudi municipal elections, an informal Islamist ticket won six of the seven seats in Riyadh. Candidates backed by Sunni Islamists also won control of the municipal councils in a number of mixed Sunni-Shi'a towns in the Eastern Province. Tribal and clan ties seemed to be the most important element in municipal elections outside the major cities.²⁸

²⁴ al-Hayat, July 3, 2003, p. 4.

²⁵ Daniel Brumberg, "Liberalization versus Democracy: Understanding Arab Political Reform," Middle East Series-Working Paper 37, Democracy and Rule of Law Project, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2003, <http://www.ceip.org/files/pdf/wp37.pdf>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ al-Hayat (London), October 26, 2002, pp. 1, 2, 6; Mohammed Almezal, "Islamists Hold Balance of Power," Gulf News (Bahrain), November 2, 2002.

²⁸ Nasser al-Salti and Raid Qusti, "Riyadh Election Winners Named," Arab News, February 12, 2005; al-Hayat, February 12, 2005, pp. 1, 6; Ali Khalil, "Sectarian Lists Circulate for Second Round of Saudi Polls," Daily Star (Beirut), March 3, 2005; Joe Avacena, "Dammam, Qatif Voters Pick Businessmen," Saudi Gazette, March 6, 2005.

- In the 2005 Palestinian presidential elections, Hamas did not field a candidate and Yasir Arafat's deputy in Fatah, Mahmoud Abbas, won a convincing victory. However, in municipal elections in the West Bank in December 2004, Hamas strongly challenged Fatah's dominance, taking control of seven town councils compared to Fatah's 12. In voting in Gaza in January 2005, Hamas swept the municipal elections, capturing two-thirds of the seats and control of seven of the 10 town councils.²⁹ Some observers predict that Hamas will outpoll Fatah in the upcoming Palestinian parliamentary elections in July 2005.
- In the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections, the list put together by Shi'i Ayatallah Ali al-Sistani won 51% of the vote and 140 of the 275 seats. The two more overtly secular Arab lists, headed up by then-Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and then-President Ghazi al-Yawir took a total of 16.3% of the vote and 45 seats. The unified Kurdish list, not particularly Islamist, won 27% and 75 seats. Among Arab voters, however, the Islamist current was dominant.³⁰

The trend in Arab elections is absolutely clear. In free elections, Islamists of various hues win. In elections where there is a governing party (or a royal preference, as in Jordan), Islamists run second and form the opposition. Only in Morocco, where more secular-left parties have a long history and organizational presence, was there an organized non-Islamist political bloc, independent of the government, which could compete with Islamist forces. The trends do not look like they are about to change. In the 2004 Sadat Chair-Zogby International poll, pluralities of those polled in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE thought that the clergy should play a greater role in their political systems. In Egypt 47% supported a greater clerical role, while 50% said the clergy should not dictate the political system, almost a tie. Only in Lebanon (with its large Christian minority) and Morocco did anti-clerical sentiment dominate (51% to 33% in Morocco and 50% to 28% in Lebanon).³¹ The more democratic the Arab world gets, the more likely it is that Islamists will come to power there.

Conclusion

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Bush Administration's push for democracy in the Arab world is unlikely to have much effect on anti-American terrorism emanating from that part of the world, but could help bring to power governments that will be much less cooperative with the United States on a whole range of issues (including, probably, cooperation in the war on terrorism and, most certainly, the Arab-Israeli peace process and military-strategic issues) than the current Arab regimes. Washington's democracy initiative can be defended as an effort to

²⁹ Arnon Regular, "Unofficial Results: Hamas Strong in Local W. Bank Elections," *Haaretz* (English), December 24, 2004, www.haaretzdaily.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=518353&contrassID=1; John Ward Anderson, "Hamas Dominates Local Vote in Gaza," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2005.

³⁰ *al-Hayat*, March 17, 2005, p. 5.

³¹ "Arab Attitudes Towards Political and Social Issues, Foreign Policy and the Media," public opinion poll conducted by the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and Zogby International, May 2004, <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/SADAT/pub>.

spread American democratic values, whatever the cost, or as a long-term gamble that the realities of governance will either moderate Islamists or lead to public disaffection from them once they are in power, as has happened in Iran. It does not serve immediate American interests either in the war on terrorism or in other important policy areas in the region.

If Washington continues on the democracy promotion road in the Arab world, at least it can take a lesson from the variety of electoral experiences briefly reviewed here. Where there are strongly-rooted non-Islamists parties, as in Morocco, the Islamists have a harder time dominating the field. Conversely, where non-Islamist political forces have been suppressed, as in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Islamist parties and candidates can dominate the field. Washington should take no comfort from the success of ruling parties in Yemen, Algeria, and Egypt against Islamist challengers. We know that, once stripped of their patronage and security control levers, ruling parties do not do very well in democratic transitional elections. The United States should focus on pushing Arab governments to open up the political space for liberal, leftist, nationalist and other non-Islamist parties to set down roots and mobilize their voters. That will take time, but, if the United States really does see the democracy promotion initiative in the Arab world as a “generational challenge,” it should be willing to take the time. If not, it should get ready for more Islamist and more anti-American Arab governments.